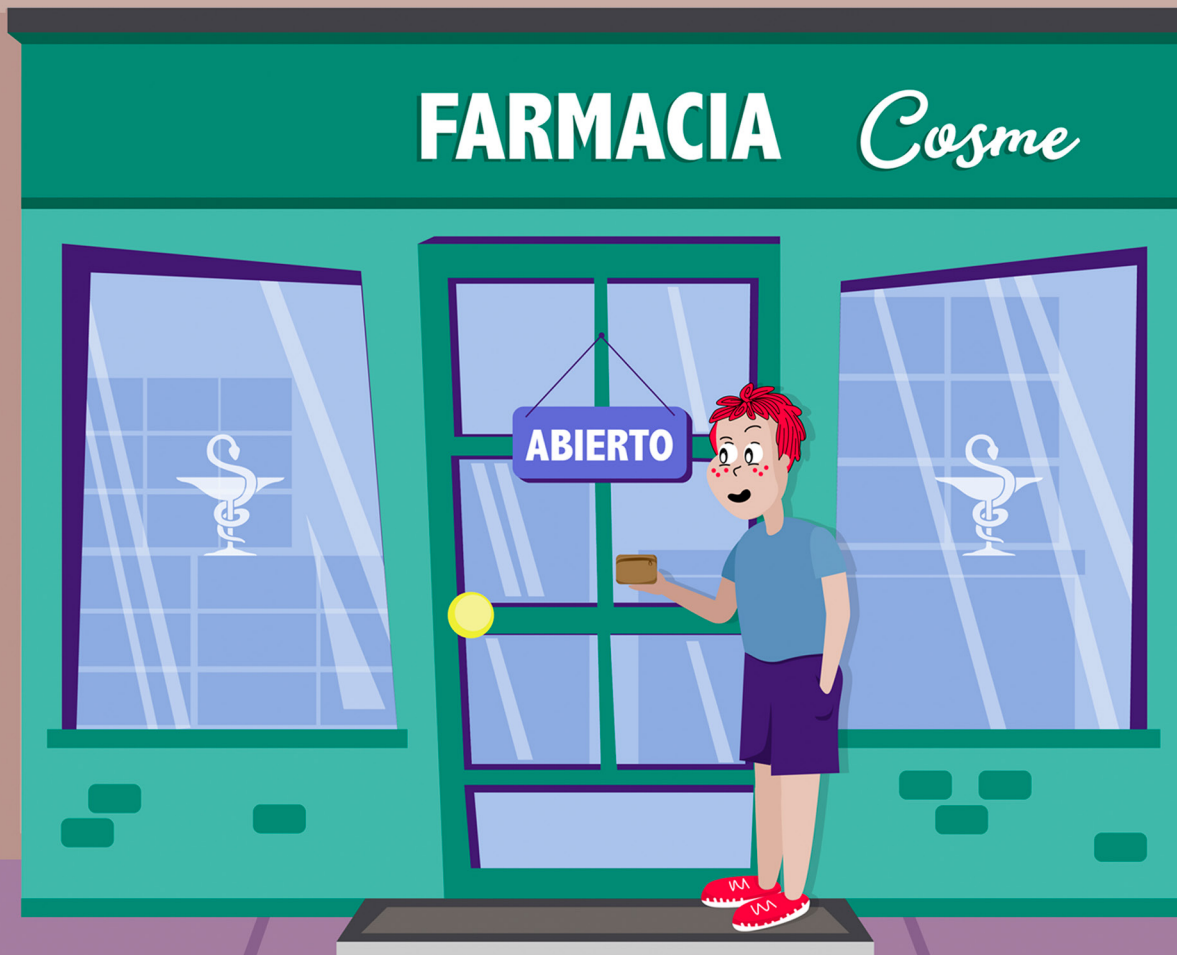


# A secret MISSION

*Sergio del Molino*



A TALE OF  
**PHARMACY**  
VALUES



**Farmacéuticos**

General Pharmaceutical Council of Spain

**Author:**



About **Sergio del Molino**

Sergio del Molino is a writer and journalist. Among others, he is the author of *La piel* (2020) and *Un tal González* (2022). His best-known work, *La España vacía* (2016), opened a social and political debate on depopulation and rural abandonment in Spain that would consolidate him as leading intellectual in the reflection on the demographic challenge. He is also a columnist for *El País* and the magazine *Ethic*, as well as a weekly contributor to *La Cultureta* on Onda Cero Radio.

He has been awarded the prestigious Alfaguara Prize in 2024.

Nico realized that things would be different once and for all when his grandmother handed him a card and told him to pick up “her stuff” at Cosme’s. He was so astonished by the order that it took him a long time to ask her where Cosme’s was, what “her stuff” was and what that card had to do with anything..

— ***Shake a leg, boy! Get a move on, go to Cosme’s and tell her I’ll go by and pay her later, so she won’t struggle..***

Grandma was always a mystery, and Nico was too shy and too proud to ask for explanations. He was also a smart boy: he’d just celebrated the outstanding marks with which he’d finished fifth grade. He was a problem solver, and he had the answers, he wasn’t used to

not knowing what to do. To understand his bewilderment, it is worth noting that Nico grew up in the city and had never run an errand before. He had never gone to school alone, never shopped for groceries, never taken the rubbish downstairs. In fact, he had never been out of the sight of his parents, who considered all these activities very dangerous and inappropriate for his age.





It was July, though, and his parents were in town and had sent him to his grandmother's house in the village. Grandma, he had already noticed, was less vigilant with him. Most of the time she didn't know where he was, she let him wander up and down the street, she never locked the front door, and when it was time for dinner, she would come out onto the doorstep and call out to him. Whenever Nico asked her for help with any task, she grumbled and said that urban children were as delicate as a flower, in need for a 24 hour babysitter, and when she was his age, she was a thousand times wiser and no longer got in the way of the grown-ups.

***— You see, such a nonsense I must put up with. I guess the fumes coming from the cars make you all city boys dizzy. Cosme's is the community pharmacy. Do you know where the community pharmacy is? There is a big green cross that lights up in the square, in front of the candy shop. Cosme was the pharmacist's father, may he rest in peace. His daughter Carmen will be there, but I still talk about Cosme's out of habit. Bring my health card with you and ask for my blood pressure pills, sleeping pills, insulin and else, I can't remember what else, anything you can get on the electronic prescription. Then quickly bring it to me without any delay, insulin needs to be put in the fridge. Hurry up boy, run for it! Time does not like to be wasted.***

Nico knew exactly what a community pharmacy was. For God's sake: he was the best of the class in social studies. He was well aware of how the health system worked. Nico headed to the square, with hurt pride, ready to prove Grandma that he was no fool and that he could run errands with the utmost diligence.

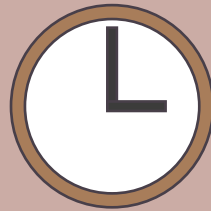


He wandered through the old, cobbled streets and even shortcut through a couple of passages he had discovered, which proved him to be a fine explorer. He recognised the big green cross at first glance (who did Grandma think he was?) and made his way to the door without being distracted by the candy shop or the joyful children playing football under the arcades of the town hall. He had a mission, a mission he could not fail. He grabbed the bronze handrail and pulled back. Ringing bells tinkled above his head and his nostrils were permeated with a mixture of smells that he couldn't identify, yet his brain reckoned as "clean". Smells like clean, he muttered to himself, though

clean does not smell. As the door closed behind him, he was embraced by the gloom and the silence. It seemed to him that the pharmacy, with its antique wooden shelves, its carved counter and its thousands (millions, I mean millions) of coloured boxes, was somewhere else, as if sheltered from the rest of the town.



*– Wait a sec, please!*



The woman's voice came from behind a curtain, as in that film. What was it called? The wizard of something. The wizard of Paws. Nico held the card in his hands for what seemed like a reasonable amount of time, until he became impatient and, in a rare feature of him, as he was known for his prudence, he reached over to the curtain and pulled it back a little. The room was somewhat of a warehouse with a small glass-walled laboratory on one side, and a long table in the centre where a woman in a white coat, gloves and mask was handling liquids in very strange beakers and pots. He could only identify one vessel: a mortar and pestle much like the one his grandmother used to make aioli and smash ingredients. The woman in the coat was grinding something in it, albeit without her grandmother's impetus. When she finished, she looked up and saw him and came to where he stood.

– ***You can't be here, kiddo.***

Although she didn't seem angry, Nico preferred to obey and apologise.





**– You are Loli’s grandson, as far as I know. Holy cow, you grow up so fast. What was your name again? Pablo, right?**

**– Nico, my name is Nico.**

**– Oh, sorry about that. You know, it’s very rude to peek behind the curtains, even though it seems to be a local convention in this town.**

**– Were you making aioli?**

**– I beg your pardon? –** Carmen laughed.

**– You mean because of the mortar? No, this is compounding, the process of combining ingredients to create a medication tailored to the needs of an individual patient. The pills and these boxes you see are made in very complicated laboratories, but some special medicines for some people are made by us for each patient. Anyway, what brings you here?**

**–I came to pick up my grandmother’s stuff.**

**–Right, how is your grandma?**

Nico shrugged and the pharmacist started typing on the computer.

**– Well, I’m almost done. It’s been over a month since your grandmother came to the pharmacy, though, and I’d like to check on her before I give her medication to make sure everything’s OK. This is what we are doing. Tell your grandmother to come by this afternoon, her stuff will be ready by then. You can come, too, I’ll explain to you how you can help me and your grandmother with her medication.**

Nico started to sweat as his mission failed. “No way”, he said to himself: he had been entrusted with the easiest of tasks, something that even the most idiotic children in the village could do. Even Alazán, who repeated grades, came and went on errands on his own, and he, smart as he was, his mental arithmetic, his ability to conjugate even the subjunctive - which is a real pleasure to conjugate- and his mastery at reciting by heart the rivers of all the Iberian Peninsula’s slopes with their tributaries, was going to return to his grandmother’s house like a good-for-nothing. How would he defend his honour after failing in the first errand of his life?

It was out of the question. Carmen seemed like a good woman, she had to help him, she wouldn't make him look like an imbecile. What was that salty stuff he was tasting? Tears? Was he crying? Crybaby on top of that. Nico, good at nothing, you possess no talents. Nico, he doesn't know his head from a hole in the ground

**—Oh, my dear child, don't cry —** The pharmacist went round the counter, opened a packet of tissues and wiped her cheeks—, ***I'm not saying this to tease you. It's just that your grandmother is kind of a carefree person, forgive me for my daring. Even though you're a grown-up and responsible boy, I shouldn't just give you her meds. Please let her know that you can run other errands without a problem, but she should***



*also come to the pharmacy so that we can check that her medication is working and that she is taking it properly, just like my father did when he was her pharmacist.*

*— Mr. Cosme.*

*— That's right, I can see you did your homework. Look, that was my dad —and he pointed to a black and white portrait of a man with a moustache—. He looks very serious there, but he was hilarious, and he knew the diseases of the whole county by heart. Listen, tell your grandmother to come by, not just to pick up the pills because I haven't seen her for a long time. Then, I'll measure her blood pressure, check her medication to make sure she's taking her pills every day at the times the doctor told her to, and make sure everything is still OK. I know that Loli is sharp as a tack and doesn't like people looking out for her, but I stayed in town to be with the people and help them with their medicines and their problems. Let her know that I'm here to look after her, even if that's annoying for her. Because this gets on your grandmother's nerves, am I wrong? I know, she's very much her own person.*

*My father certainly chased her ever since she was diagnosed with diabetes. And now it's my turn. And it'll be your turn too. You'll see, you'll have to make sure she takes her pills and doesn't eat the wrong things. Anyways, I would like her to pay me a visit by the pharmacy. Let's make a deal: if you help me to follow-up on your grandma's medication and make sure she takes care of herself, I'll let you into the pharmacy and show you the flasks, the scales and the pipettes. Do you fancy science?*

Of course I do. How could I not? Science was the funniest of his school subjects.

While at first glance, keeping an eye on his grandmother seemed a much more difficult mission than the first errand - whose failure still stung and made him sob - Nico saw himself as capable of accomplishing it.

He would be a secret agent, a spy, Carmen's partner in crime. Carmen herself taught him how to make a potpourri for someone whose skin had been burned by an accident he had suffered as a child. He kept his hands to himself,

but watched her very carefully  
as she used the pestle and  
mortar and measured liquids into  
beakers and tubes with numbers  
on them.

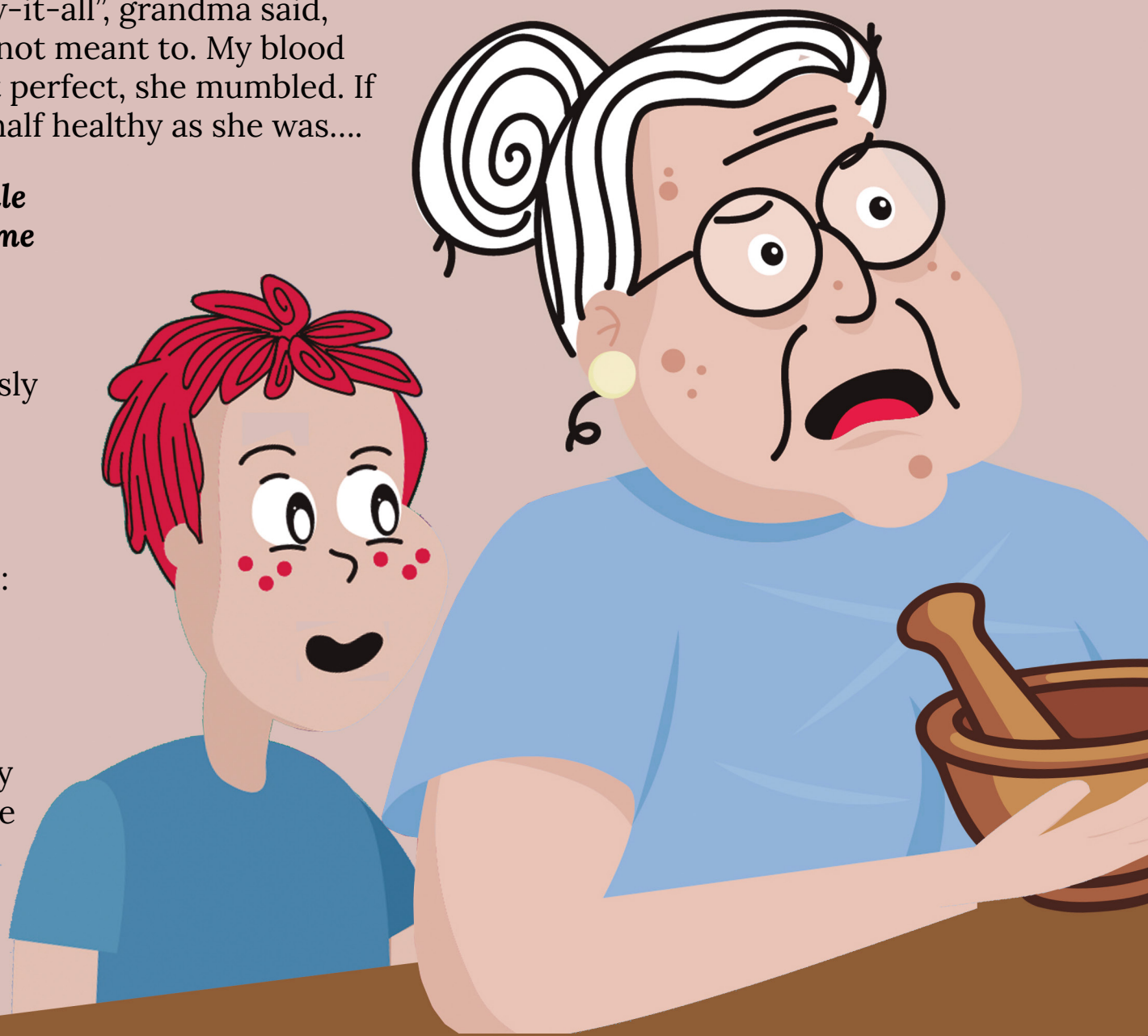


After a while she returned to her grandmother's, who didn't scold him for coming in empty-handed, although she grumbled about Cosme's daughter: "such a know-it-all", grandma said, she's just poking around where she is not meant to. My blood pressure measurement went back just perfect, she mumbled. If only the other ladies of her age were half healthy as she was....

**– Do you think I am gaga? I bet I handle more errands in a single day than Cosme does in a month, for God's sake!**

She went on and on, grumbling as she fiddled around in the kitchen, graciously pounding at a stone mortar, which was not as cool as the one Cosme had in the pharmacy. A very strong and delicious smell of garlic emanated from it, Nico licked his lips and smiled: grandma didn't like to be controlled. That's why Carmen's ruse was so clever: Grandma would never suspect anything, she wouldn't know that she was being watched and looked after by her grandson, the city boy, the delicate flower, the good-for-nothing.

You'll see, Grandma, we are going to take good care of you.





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